

# **The Home as a Significant Source for Developing Language and Study Skills: Fifteen Tips for Families**

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IDRA believes that the education business is family business. Twenty years ago, psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner was asked what children needs to be strong and healthy. His answer was, “Lots of time with an adult who’s crazy about [them]” (Byrne, 1996).

His answer is as true now as it was then. This article recognizes that parents and families are a child’s first teachers, through the informal learning that takes place in the home to prepare a child for school success and lifelong learning.

As a complement to “formal” instruction in school, this article offers recommendations for families to support language, literacy and study skills from an early age, through loving interaction and focused skill building at home. During the early years, children are not only learning knowledge and skills at home and in school, but they also are acquiring dispositions toward reading and learning that will last a lifetime (Gottfried, 1983; Katz, 1985; Elkind, 1987; Katz and Chard, 1989).

## ***Premises for Parent Involvement***

Parent involvement in the education of their children is based on three premises. First, parents are an important resource for teachers because they have valuable information about their children that is essential in planning meaningful educational experiences. Teachers who take advantage of parents as a resource see the benefits of expanding on assets and strengths that children already bring to school.

Second, parents and educators share a common goal – to develop children’s social and academic skills to make choices and compete equitably in this society. Successful teaching requires the collaboration of a team composed of administrators, teachers, specialists and parents with very distinct roles and responsibilities. Together, the team establishes a vision, sets goals, and defines what the individual members’ roles and responsibilities will be. The team meets periodically to review progress and holds itself accountable for the educational success of children.

Third, parents are taxpayers whose money is used to purchase the most beneficial educational services that will result in a positive impact on their children.

When we see parent involvement from this perspective, we will witness great educational strides in all children. Schools and parents must partner and work together in a manner that values and respects the important contributions of parents and families. Furthermore, it is of mutual benefit for educators and families to collaborate and plan together to leverage each partner’s contributions to the educational process for the ultimate benefit of children.

## ***Recommendations for Families***

With the advent of pencil and paper tests and their importance in defining school accountability, reading has become pivotal in measuring student academic success. Without a good handle in reading, children are not able to do well on tests. Parents expect schools to assume leadership in assuring that their children succeed. Parents also expect schools to initiate efforts to engage them in this event.

The home's potential as a significant source for developing language skills has not traditionally been given much importance. But studies show that families play a vital role in the social, cultural, and linguistic development of children.

Following are recommendations for parents and families to help make the home a valuable teaching resource where children are constantly acquiring and practicing language, learning, and study skills.

**Strengthen your relationship with your children and bond as a caring and responsible family.** A close family wants every member to succeed and challenges each other to reach their fullest potential. Family relationships are established by culture and must be respected. Family unity is nurtured when everyone cares for each other, morally support and stand up for each other.

Parents and the extended family play a special role in the family that must be respected and valued by each member of the family. Some family members are granted privileges because of their position in the family, e.g. eldest brother and sister, grandparents, and aunts and uncles.

- Engage in many one-to-one, face-to-face, gentle and supportive interactions.
- Frequently talk with, sing to and read to infants and young children.
- Actively listen to children and teach them to listen to others while together you describe an event, negotiate a social problem, or work out a solution.
- Engage in positive storytelling about the family or about children's experiences.

**Strengthen your children's self-concept and positive identity as a contributor to the family and the community.** A strong cultural affiliation strengthens a child's self concept and positive identity.

- Be positive in your interactions: A child's self concept is fragile and can be affected by adult perceptions and actions.
- Encourage and love children: A child who lives with criticism and fear learns to ostracize and devalue others.
- Value and display the artwork and stories of children. Pictures can be hung on the wall at heights that children can see.
- Provide opportunities for children to appreciate the work of others in the family and to appreciate art, books, plays and performances outside the home.
- Provide opportunities for children to talk, listening carefully and offering well-placed expansions to their sentences to enhance meaning.
- Help children develop a sense of themselves as initiators of action and competent actors.

**Provide an oral language and print rich environment.** Children learn new words at a far more rapid rate – almost 20 words a day – when their language and print environment is sufficiently rich in vocabulary (Berk, 1996).

- Consider your home, and in particular the children's rooms, as places of learning.
- Each room in the house has a special purpose. Have specific guidelines that apply in the use of each room. Children see the furnishings and decorations and associate certain actions with each room or furnishings.
- Expand upon children's conversation and prolong conversation with them.
- Plan walks and excursions that expand opportunities and experiences. Memories linked to new words provide categories and structures to which children can readily connect what they are learning.
- Foster positive interaction, conversation and collaboration, thus promoting language development, problem solving, and perspective taking.

**Build a strong vocabulary base.** What the family does on a daily basis, vacations and trips that the family takes, and the expressions of affection and emotion, all constitute rich opportunities for vocabulary development.

Vocabulary building can be both an unconscious and conscious effort. Vocabulary associated with actions and relationships becomes integrated into the functional vocabulary of the children. A word is remembered at three levels: awareness, application and evaluation levels.

- Take every opportunity to take children to the application level whenever possible. The word may be too abstract for a child's level but must become a part of the family vocabulary.
- Involve children in routine tasks, like measuring ingredients for cooking, observing the environment and recording changes in temperature. These interactions set a strong base for building later reading and math skills.
- For younger children, teach them how to link ideas with words like: but, because, when, after, until and before.

**Practice good study habits with your children.**

- Engage in conversation about learning. Research shows this strengthens children's abilities to communicate, express themselves, understand, reason and solve problems (Wells, 1983; Wilkinson, 1984; Nelson, 1985; Chang-Wells and Wells, 1993; Cobb, Wood and Yackel, 1993; Palincsar, Brown and Campione, 1993).
- Create spaces for quiet reading and learning in your home and encourage times of quiet play or study by themselves.
- Provide a good example for children to see other family members enjoying a variety of books, magazines, writing, studying and spending quiet times in taking care of family business or record keeping.

**Encourage and develop higher order thinking skills.**

- Ask thought-provoking questions, adding complexity to tasks.
- Play games that involve classifying objects for a purpose, such as animals, plants, wheels and gears.
- Teach children that words can have multiple meanings. The ability to take multiple points of view vastly expands communication skills.

- Focus on several aspects of a problem at one time and reverse children's thinking. Mentally go through a series of steps and then reverse them, for example, subtraction can undo or reverse addition.
- Talk about past, current, and future events so that children can learn how to sequence and reason about concrete and abstract concepts (Thornton and Vukelich, 1988; Barton and Levstik, 1996).

**Plan with your children's teachers your home approach to developing literacy skills.** When children sense that teachers respect and value their families, this supports their own sense of self-esteem and competence.

- Set goals and celebrate learning, sharing with all who are involved.
- Help children plan, anticipate, reflect on, and revisit their own learning experiences.
- Recognize developmental accomplishments.
- For young children, develop print awareness by listening to and reading stories and poems, experimenting with writing and drawing, copying, and using their own invented spelling.
- Draw on children's curiosity and desire to make sense of their world. Motivate them to become involved in interesting reading and learning activities.
- Encourage dispositions to learning in the home that will strengthen what is learned at school, such as humor, curiosity, and helpfulness (Katz and Chard, 1989).
- Help children create their own stories and write them down to be read and enjoyed by the family.
- Use humor, jokes, tongue-twisters, puns and riddles to encourage language skills.
- Ask your child to describe something, explain how a task was done, or how something works.
- Write down simple words or phrases. Make a game where you tape these up and see if a child can recognize them. Use words that are meaningful to them (such as their names, names of friends or pets, phrases like "I love you," and commonly seen functional words like "exit").

**Read and discuss books geared to children's interest and reading levels.**

- Bring a variety of interesting books, magazines and print material into the home.
- Have picture books and storybooks in the home that show people of different ages, racial and cultural groups, family types, and abilities or challenges.
- Encourage children to pursue interests or hobbies in depth to support concept development. Children can develop "expertise" in areas that are of intellectual interest to them – rocks, dinosaurs, horses, state flags – the habits of mind they develop from deep study in one area are applicable to learning in other areas (NAEYC, 1997).
- Plan a fun visit to your local library or a bookstore and spend time with your child selecting good books together.

**Provide opportunities for children to teach the family information that they have learned in school or from other sources, such as friends, books, magazines and television.** Children will demonstrate their learning strategies by using them when trying to teach a lesson. Teaching allows children the opportunity to learn concepts and processes at a deeper level.

- Encourage home plays or dramas where children create and act out simple roles, scenes, routines or comedies. These can strengthen children's memory, language, logical reasoning, imagination and creativity.

**Make choices together on television programs and books to strike a balance between programs for enjoyment, such as cartoons and educational programs.**

- Practice consensus building at home, such as setting rules and agreeing on activities.
- Give children an opportunity to ask questions for clarification or respond with their own ideas in conversations with family members.
- Ask children to remember and tell the sequence of stories.
- Limit access to television programs that depict violence.
- Teach alternatives to aggression for resolving conflicts by communicating needs and feelings verbally.

**Provide opportunities for family meetings where each child contributes and discusses concerns.**

- Encourage children to express their thoughts and share their feelings. Take children's ideas seriously.
- Help children understand the viewpoints of others.
- Support social and emotional development that will help children work and interact effectively with peers and have a sense of "industry" (Erikson, 1963).
- Seize opportunities for problem-solving and discussions that allow children to speak, create and apply their knowledge and understanding as they grow.
- Help children express strong emotions constructively and maintain positive relationships with others.
- Reason with children and help them to understand the rationale for the rules they follow.
- Set clear limits and intervene to enforce consequences.
- Teach concepts of fairness and rules of interaction, discuss action-results-consequences.
- Help children develop empathy in their interactions with others and better peer relationships.

**Use the Internet to seek information and resources to use with your children.**

- Learn for yourself how to use the Internet before teaching your child how to use it.
- Take time to see what your children are interested in and what they are doing online.

**Provide opportunities for your children to use the computer and other technology.**

- Use developmentally appropriate software, such as ClarisWorks for Kids, and allow children to explore computer experiences.
- Plan time for you and your children to learn and apply computer technology together.

**Balance the use of media with personal interaction.**

- Plan times for family interaction and sharing of ideas.
- Do not let television, rather than family or teachers, define values and priorities for children.
- Take time to foster manners and morals.
- Use common sense to limit the access to violence that is depicted on television, in movies, and in video games. Thousands of research studies show the negative effects of such exposure on children.
- Promote ethical behaviors, such as trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship.

**Encourage a bilingual environment.** Research supports the benefits of bilingualism in cognitive, language, and literacy development. Bilingual children perform better than monolingual speakers on measures of analytic ability, concept formation, and cognitive flexibility.

- If your family speaks Spanish and English, use bilingual skills. Encourage bilingual education in schools. Abrupt submersion in an English-only environment can create a risk of “semi-lingualism,” or inadequate proficiency in both languages, especially among low-income Hispanic children (August and Garcia, 1988).
- Have books with languages other than English in the home or visit your library or local bookstore to expose your children to written print material other than English.
- Listen to radio or watch television programming other than English, and encourage children to hear and value diversity in culture expressed through speech and language.

## ***Working Together***

This article has touched upon the informal learning in the home and in the community with supportive adults that can complement formal instruction at school. Families and teachers working together can foster important reading and math skills for school success and lifelong learning. In setting high expectations and offering focused support, teachers and families can set the stage for children to do the following:

- Become avid and good readers,
- Enjoy problem solving and mathematics,
- Speak and write correctly,
- Make independent and sound decisions,
- Develop good study habits,
- Have self-confidence,
- Get along well with others, and
- Enjoy learning and the school experience.

It is essential that families and schools work together to support student success at every level throughout their education, from pre-school through higher education. Children need to acquire not only the mechanics of reading and language arts, but also the desire to read and a love of learning.

It is also essential that loving adults support young people in applying their learning to solve problems throughout their lives both in the classroom and eventually through active civic engagement with their families and communities.

*For more information on tools to help schools and families work together more effectively for student success, contact IDRA to learn about the Community Engagement Toolkit for families and schools (210-4441710; [www.idra.org](http://www.idra.org)).*

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